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### **Rare birth defect cases in Yakima County lead to prevention advice, state investigation**

**YAKIMA**—Health officials in Yakima County are advising pregnant women to take steps to prevent a rare kind of birth defect that has been detected in unusual numbers locally. Anencephaly is a rare and fatal birth defect that results from incomplete formation of the brain during the first month of pregnancy. In a typical year, the Washington State Department of Health expects about one case among the approximately 4,000 annual births in the county, but eight cases were reported in 2012.

Anencephaly and a related disorder of the spinal cord—spina bifida—are typically caused by lack of the B-vitamin, folic acid, in the mother's diet, or by certain medications or hereditary conditions that interfere with the body's ability to use folic acid. The state health department is investigating these possible causes and others, including drinking water sources, tobacco smoking, health history and pregnancy history in its investigation. Dr. Chris Spitters, Health Officer for the Yakima Health District, said that, "Some national experts think that multiple risk factors and exposures at the same time, rather than any single factor, may account for most cases of this rare and tragic birth defect."

The state health department investigators say it may take several months to complete the work and share information about what was found with the health care providers and the community.

Meanwhile, Spitters said that all women in the child-bearing years can reduce their risk by taking a daily prenatal vitamin that includes 400-1000mcg of folic acid, seeing a health care provider as soon as pregnancy is recognized, and telling their health care provider about all medications and nutritional supplements they have been taking recently.

The state health department also recommends that private well water users who are pregnant or planning pregnancy have their well tested at least once annually for nitrates and bacteria. If the nitrate results exceed the recommended maximum limit of 10mg/L, an alternate drinking water source should be used.

This announcement comes at the end of the annual January recognition of National Birth Defects Prevention Month. Spitters acknowledged that "This reminds us of the importance of raising awareness about birth defects, the leading cause of infant death and a cause of suffering for many children and families. It is even more important," he added, "that throughout the year we do what we can every single day to protect and promote the health of pregnant women and children. That is exactly what our state health partners are doing through this investigation."

For more information on anencephaly and other birth defects, visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Birth Defects webpage (<http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/birthdefects>). For more information on testing of private well water, visit the state Department of Health Drinking Water webpage (<http://www.doh.wa.gov/YouandYourFamily/HomeSafety/DrinkingWater.aspx>).

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